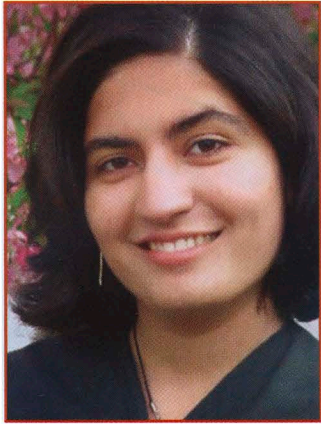


# Letter from Kashmir



As her homeland struggles with the devastation of a massive earthquake, a Newhouse alumna wonders if compassion can conquer indifference

By Sana Bég

ANANTNAG, KASHMIR—A conspiracy of silence surrounds Kashmir. Since 1989, more than 90,000 people have died here in a struggle for independence, but it seems as if the outside world—and now Kashmiris themselves—couldn't care less. After so many years of struggle, perhaps they have become indifferent to constant gunfire, random explosions, and rampant disappearances and deaths. But what do you do when at least another 85,000 people die—this time in a matter of seconds? How do you conspire to stay silent then?

I've asked myself these questions since Kashmir was struck with a 7.6 magnitude earthquake on October 8, 2005. Kashmir sits amid the majestic Himalayan mountains and is home to more than 13 million people. But Kashmiris have always endured their share of misfortune. Soon after India and Pakistan gained independence from British rule in 1947, Kashmir was divided between the two neighboring countries, with both laying claim to the entire region and turning it into a battleground. In addition, an indigenous movement seeks independence for this coveted land. Today, the border between India and Pakistan, known as the "Line of Control," is among the most heavily guarded borders in the world. The natural beauty of Kashmir—once called "Paradise on Earth"—remains, but life for the common person has become far from heavenly.

At 9:20 a.m. on that fateful day last October, I was at home in Anantnag, Kashmir, with my family, when all of a sudden everything began to shake. Scared, I rushed downstairs and out of the house with the rest of my family. Outside, all we could see was a large cloud of dust. By then the ground had stopped shaking, but the fear on everyone's faces was far from gone. My mother held my father's hand and tears rolled down from her beautiful eyes. They began to pray together, and I joined in as well.

When the dust cloud cleared, we saw it had come from our next-door neighbors' home. Part of their house's back wall had crumbled and the bricks had fallen into our yard. Thankfully, no one was hurt, and our home was not damaged. Throughout the day, we sought updates from family and friends as to their safety and were relieved that our town had been spared the brunt of this quake. But, later in the day, listening to the news on the radio and television, the event's magnitude became apparent. The BBC reported preliminary estimates that more than 50,000 people had died. As days passed, that number continued to rise, with estimates of more than 85,000 killed, hundreds of thousands injured, and millions homeless. The vast majority of death and destruction had occurred on the Pakistani-controlled side of the Line of Control, in the area known as Azad Kashmir. The earthquake's epicenter was there, and all villages and towns in that area were completely razed.

I received a firsthand look at the devastation in the small border town of Uri, about a four-hour drive from our home. The earthquake destroyed more than 80 percent of the houses in Uri, killing thousands and injuring even more. I visited the area with my Mom and my Dad—a volunteer with the Red Cross in Kashmir. The closer we got to Uri, the more the earthquake's destruction became real for me. Here, irony constantly stared me in the face. Billboards and posters boasted of Kashmir being the



“pride of India.” They also noted Uri as a stop for the Peace Bus, a transportation line that runs through the disputed region, allowing family members divided by the border to unite. The Peace Bus, started in April 2005, was considered a milestone in the slow moving and highly politicized peace process between India and Pakistan. But, sadly, it seemed that the site where two nuclear rivals decided to push their egos aside and give peace a chance was the very site that the forces of nature had ripped apart.

At first glance, despite the tired and grief-stricken faces, the majority of Uri residents seemed normal. But every now and then, I was reminded that life here was far from “normal.” One thing that caught my attention was the bizarre cry of an angry man yelling at some villagers. His voice crackled and scratched against the sides of his throat. His eyes conveyed a sense of despair, shock, and bewilderment, and his dirty, unkempt appearance led me to believe that he had probably lost more than just his home. Had he been digging through debris to reach a victim? Perhaps he had lost a child in a collapsed school building, or his wife had been killed.

As the days went by and temperatures continued to drop, I kept thinking about the 3.5 million people left homeless by the earthquake. Winter is a struggle here even under normal circumstances, given the extreme cold, regular power failures, and poor heating. Thousands of tents were sent to the region to provide shelter, but only a fraction were winterized. And now heavy rain, ice, and snow, combined with freezing temperatures, had turned this region into a death zone, and the majority of the tents were of absolutely no use.

Amid this tragedy, I was relieved to learn from my cousin, Fozia Qazi G’89, G’01, that a few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had the foresight to realize the folly of dependence on tents alone. In Indian-administered Kashmir, CHINAR.org (Child Nurture and Relief), an organization that Fozia co-founded and runs, was trying hard to establish suitable housing for the victims. Fozia’s NGO has an orphanage in the capital city of Srinagar, where children orphaned by the ongoing conflict have found a safe and loving home. Now there were more orphans, and CHINAR was helping with relief efforts. They adopted the village of Saidpora, near Uri, and a neighboring hamlet, Balakot Patti. Instead of providing tents, CHINAR constructed shelters of corrugated steel and plywood, with two rooms and a kitchen. By mid-January, they had built 55 shelters for families. I volunteered at one of the sites and found CHINAR’s work fulfilling. In fact, CHINAR’s shelters were so well received that several government and NGO agencies followed suit in providing similar housing.

However, in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, thousands of

victims remained in remote hilltop areas, without access to medical care and other relief. These regions have few roads, and there were even fewer access routes given the landslides that accompanied the earthquake. Various helicopter missions dropped aid to these regions and evacuated the seriously injured to hospitals in the lower plains and other areas. But realizing the grim conditions that lay ahead for these homeless, I couldn’t fathom why the UN, Pakistan, and India were not coordinating a mass evacuation, especially with predictions that thousands more would die from the severe cold and related diseases.

I wonder why it was the fate of a region and a people already devastated by years of turmoil and poverty to be tested by such a terrible tragedy. I can’t comprehend why, just like with the 2004 tsunami, famine in Africa, and Hurricane Katrina, it is the poorest of the poor who suffer the most. But then I am reminded of a comment made by my grandmother, a



Children play outside makeshift tents in Bandi in Indian-administered Kashmir in early January.

deeply religious and unpretentious lady. She explained that such catastrophic events are not tests for the millions of poor and helpless who do not have even the basics to survive. Such disasters are really a trial for the rest of us who live comfortably, to see whether we allow such tragedies to be forgotten just as soon as the evening news ends, or the media’s attention moves on to more ostentatious stories. The test is to see whether the rest of us do our part to help the poor on a regular and substantial basis, or whether we conspire to remain silent in word and deed.

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